World’s Fair Visit Inspires Town’s First Telephone | Nutley Yesterday · Today - 1961

World’s Fair Visit Inspires Town’s First Telephone

FROM EDMUND GUTHRIE

MOST of the visitors to the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876 who saw Alexander Graham Bell demonstrating his new invention considered the telephone a “talking toy.” But not Patrick F. Guthrie of Nutley.

As Bell explained to sightseers how the telephone worked and how it would be used, Guthrie was fired with enthusiasm. When Guthrie later moved from New York City to Nutley and opened a general store on Passaic Avenue, between The Enclosure and Chestnut Street, he did some experimenting himself. Obtaining some calves’ bladders from a local butcher, he made them into diaphragms for two box-like telephones and connected them to a wire he ran through the woods across the street from his store.

A half-century ahead of his times, Guthrie also imagined jet propulsion in such great details that in 1946, when the first jet engines were being perfected, Paul Allan Hughes, a veteran flier of the Lafayette Escadrille with the French armies in World War I, wrote from New York to Guthrie’s family to remind them that Patrick Guthrie had dreamed up jet propulsion decades before it was invented.

The same inquisitive Guthrie mind which led him to make his own telephone and set him off on the theory of jet propulsion invented ice cream sodas. At least that is what Nutley claims, and it never has been disputed that Guthrie who employed a sevenfoot nobleman from the Old World to make Nutley’s first ice cream also invented the delectable soda simply by putting a hunk of ice cream into some cherry pop one day to see how it tasted.

When Nutley ate its first ice cream at Pat Guthrie’s, Baron de Saint Mart, a cavalryman by profession who fled to this country after he killed an opponent in a duel, turned the handle on the freezer. Mark Twain, on one of his weekend visits to the farmhouse of H. C. Bunner, editor of Puck, then living here, ate his first ice cream at Guthrie’s and smacked his lips.

Guthrie was determined to have a telephone in his store. At that time there was none in Nutley, none nearer than Belleville. He secured the rights-of-way, obtained the backing of some friends and arranged to have a line from Newark to Belleville extended to Nutley.

It ran along Washington Avenue to Park Avenue then called Avondale Road. Then it cut across a wooded section to Walnut Street and over the hill to Passaic Avenue, the wire being attached to trees most of the way. In 1887 the telephone was placed in service-the first in Nutley. The cost was $210 a year!

The instrument was a small desk, which today is still being used as a typewriter desk, with the transmitter arm holding the mouthpiece coming out of the center of the desk top. To the rear, behind glass were the bells and other equipment and below were the batteries. A crank on the side was used for ringing.

A couple of years later Guthrie got one of the very first telephone booths, known as a Johnstown booth. It was larger than those of today and had double quartered oak panels and glass windows, sound-proofed but definitely not air-conditioned. In warm weather the door had to be kept open. Each week a woman was sent to wash and polish the windows of the booth.

When, in 1894, Guthrie built a new building to house his store, at 296 Highfield Lane, where his son and daughter continued the family business after the father's death, the telephone and booth were moved to the new place.

The Guthrie telephone was used by everyone in the vicinity. In many cases the calling parties were so unfamiliar with the telephone that they would get Mr. or Mrs. Guthrie to put through the calls for them, and in some cases to act as interpreters.

After Mrs. Guthrie once had gotten a call through to Iowa during a thunderstorm the caller was too scared to talk. Since Nutley had no jail, when Constable John Conway captured a man who had murdered his wife, he brought his prisoner to the store and had Mr. Guthrie call Newark to have a horse-drawn patrol wagon sent out. Most of the calls for undertakers seemed to be at night. Mrs. Guthrie might be awakened by someone calling up to her window, "Yoohoo! John just passed away! Can we telephone'?"

The store was a sort of general meeting place for the community. Among those dropping in were Mark Twain, Annie Oakley, H. C. Bunner, the witty editor of Puck, Albert Sterner the painter and Patrick Nelson.

There was always a large group there on election nights. By telephone Nutley heard the returns of the election of Harrison in 1888, of Cleveland in 1892 and of McKinley in 1896.

At the insistence of his father, Edmund J. Guthrie became a telephone man, employed in the office of the plant engineer of the N.J. Bell Telephone Co. He retired after thirty years of service and is a life member of the Telephone Pioneers of America.

Probably the first residence telephone in Nutley was in the Walnut Street rectory of Reverend John F. Morris of St. Mary's Church.

There were about 50 telephones in Nutley, by 1900, and in 1903 the lines were transferred to the Passaic switchboard. This meant a change from magneto to common battery service. The increase in the number of Nutley telephones was rapid and by 1910 it had jumped to 464, and ten years later, in 1920 it was over 1,000. In 1950 it had reached 14,000.

By 1925, to meet the demand for service a switchboard was installed on Chestnut Street near Passaic Avenue which served Nutley subscribers from August 27, 1925, until the present dial equipment in the new building at 296 Franklin Avenue, was cut into service on January 15, 1949·

Patrick Guthrie was born in New York, and the first time he ever came to New Jersey was with friends, the Purdy boys who worked in the same printing office, Harper's Weekly Magazine, where he worked. He never saw the Nutley Park section of town, before he started into business here. The Purdy homestead was in the Silver Lake section of Belleville near Bird' s Woods and the Mushroom Station on the Greenwood Lake Branch of the Erie, the place where they caught the last freight through to Jersey City on Sunday nights, to get to work in New York City.

When Guthrie made these weekend trips to Silver Lake he made friends with the folks in the neighborhood, and so wandered down the old road to "Dublin" and the Hanily farm, at Passaic Avenue and Harrison Street in Nutley.

To ride the freight back towards New York Guthrie and the Purdy boys always met at the same location, late at night. They spotted the first open freight car ahead of the caboose, where the Flagman was on duty. One Sunday night, in the darkness, they dropped into a half-filled car of empty flour bags, and when they looked over the situation in the morning, their clothes were ruined.

On other nights when they could not make the freight train, they walked the tracks through the Erie Railroad tunnel to Jersey City. That was pure adventure because at night the tunnel was pitch-dark. They often had no idea which track they were on until a head-light from an on-coming engine flashed before their eyes to make them realize the danger.

Nutley's "Greenwich Village" on Passaic Avenue, in those days, crowded close to Chestnut Street and all the neighbors helped one another in sickness and emergency. They banded together in a unit, which was called "United Friends." The only doctor in the Township was Doctor Daily. If anyone fell sick the men of the neighborhood, in turn, would sit all night with a patient, playing cards with him and making him comfortable. The women also assisted by caring for the children and doing the house-work when a family was in trouble.

Every year a platform was built under the trees for out-door dances. The crowds entered the woods from Chestnut Street, east of Passaic Avenue. This big event of the year usually took place about the Fourth-of-July, when the June-bugs and mosquitoes were in season. The money raised from these dances helped pay charity expenses for the year.

The dance floor was square, with a railing all around it. From posts at the four corners, kerosene-flares lighted the dance floor. The band-stand was covered over and kerosene-lamps were used for light. The Dance Master, late in the afternoon, would chip off paraffin candles and stamp them into the floor, and with the help of neighborhood youngsters, backsliding and falling all over the

place, the dance floor would be as smooth as glass. When the floor was lighted for the evening, the Dance Master, with his badge of authority, would weave back and forth among the dancers to spot any “Speilers” on the floor. If someone was suspected, the Dance Master would stop suddenly and tap the culprit on the shoulder, warning him to “break away.”

The mosquitoes and the bright lights were too much for Guthrie’s son, Edmund, on one occasion. When his eyes would not stay open, he dragged himself under the dance platform and nestled in a bed of dry leaves where the noise of the traps and the cymbals put him to sleep. At closing time, when the stands were cleared and the lights were out, Nutley families often would then roundup their sleeping youngsters. They often found them asleep under the dance floor and had to pull them out by the feet and carry them home.

Edmund Guthrie remembers that when friends from New York City would come to Nutley to spend a vacation in the country, they seemed to be scared of the mosquitoes. New Jersey had a reputation which few would dare to deny. In those days, New York newspapers made much of the “Jersey mosquitoes” in their cartoons.

The natives of Nutley did not bother too much about mosquitoes; there were no wire window screens. The mosquitoes would come in, buzz around the house and fly out again. Some families had cotton mosquito netting at the kitchen windows but that was chiefly to keep the flies out.

Tags

- Mark Twain
- Guthrie
- Bunner